DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 650 FL 014 405

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TITLE Testing Spanish Native Language Skills in Bilingual Education.
PUB DATE 80
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Summer Symposium on Bilingual Multicultural Education Research (Buffalo, NY, May-June 1980).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Bilingual Education; Elementary Secondary Education; *Language Proficiency; *Language Skills; *Language Tests; Native Speakers; *Spanish; Teacher Evaluation; *Testing Problems

ABSTRACT

Although research on bilingualism in the schools shows the importance of measuring both English and Spanish language skills regularly, the testing of Spanish falls behind in both quality and frequency. Concerted multidisciplinary cooperation among bilingual educators, linguists, and psychometricians is now needed to produce a variety of valid instruments that simultaneously address the pedagogical and classificatory needs of bilingual programs as well as evaluators' and researchers' needs for versatile and accurate measures of educationally consequential skills. Tests currently used sometimes try not to identify limited-English students to save budgets, rest on questionable assumptions, purport to measure the impossible, do not guide users in the results, or present linguistically unrealistic demands. Academic achievement tests are often not well suited to Spanish speakers. The need is for tests that avoid the pitfalls of current measures, have high content validity and practical administrability, have scaling and categorizing systems well tested in groups with a meaningful range of language competencies at different grade or developmental levels, and measure all receptive and productive language modes. Additional techniques should be developed for testing bilingual teachers' professional and interpersonal language proficiency. (MSE)

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TESTING SPANISH NATIVE LANGUAGE SKILLS IN BILINGUAL EDUCATION*

by

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*Paper presented at the Summer Symposium on Bilingual Multicultural Education Research, Buffalo, New York, May-June 1980.

Introduction

The practice of testing Spanish native language skills in bilingual education is so intertwined with entry-classification and exit-reclassification practices, which involve the additional assessment of English language skills, that it is difficult to speak about the assessment of proficiency in one language without thinking about the other. Stated another way, the problems and issues which besiege the testing of Spanish language skills--and the opportunities to improve the associated measurement strategies and instruments--are closely paralleled in the English domain, and since we will be mainly discussing the testing of children who are actually or nascently bilingual, it is easy to meld one's concerns and thoughts on these subjects.

It seems also that the testing of Spanish native language skills is in most Spanish-English bilingual program settings not done as often or as extensively (in terms of different aspects of language) as the assessment of English language skills. In this author's opinion this occurs primarily because program eligibility requirements emphasize English--not native language--skills, and secondarily because there are more and qualitatively better, commercially available tests in English than in Spanish. Then, too, the fact that most bilingual programs are transitional in nature probably augers for greater testing in the unmarked language, instruction in which is closer to traditional educational ideology (Banks, 1979).

So although research on bilingualism in the schools indicates the importance of measuring both languages on a regular basis, the testing of Spanish language skills continues to languish in both quality and frequency (Bernal, 1977). The time has come for intelligent, multidisciplinary cooperation among bilingual educators, linguists, and psychometricians to design

and produce a variety of valid instruments (Bernal, Note 1) which simultaneously address the pedagogical and classificatory needs of bilingual programs and evaluators' and researchers' needs for versatile and accurate measures of educationally consequential skills.

Testing Bilingual Proficiency

Historically the concepts of limited English speaking ability (LESA) and more recently limited English proficient (LEP) were established more for compliance accountability than for curricular planning. LESA can be measured by tests which measure a student's aural comprehension and speaking proficiency in English; extant tests of language proficiency, while measuring a student's skills in both English and Spanish, were developed at the time when this construct was in vogue. LEP, on the other hand, is more comprehensive, at least beyond the second grade or so, when skills in reading and writing begin to ascend in importance. No single test or test battery for measuring LEP exists, and unless new Title VII regulations or Lau guidelines specify or operationalize this construct, individual programs must determine what this means for themselves (Bernal, Note 2).

Many bilingual programs, unfortunately, administer only the English parts of these language assessment tests, reasoning--in this case correctly --that a LESA child is also LEP. In the later elementary grades, however, a non-LESA child may be LEP, as discussed above.

Still, knowledge of LEP status alone, without data of the child's ability in Spanish, has limited usefulness for designing appropriate interventions, since Spanish-based interventions will probably not be used or at least not based on objective student data. Given a LEP child entering school for the first time, information about her/his Spanish competencies

might lead us to suspect the validity of the testing administration, help us decide to refer the child for further assessment, provide important placement information, or screen potentially gifted children whose native or English language skills might be very "mature," i.e., much more developed than those of their typical agemates.

Cummins' (1979) recent work suggests that the continuous assessment of bilingual students' progress in the development of native language skills is important, particularly if one wants to predict their success in an all-English educational environment. Native language achievement is an indicator of students' general academic potential in English as well. The fact that an increasing number of bilingual programs are including non-LEP (i.e., English proficient, or EP) students in the program, for many of whom Spanish is in effect a second language, also necessitates the testing of Spanish language skills.

The quality of tests for measuring Spanish proficiency varies considerably; but not one to date is truly outstanding, or even satisfactory. This author has served on an advisory committee on proficiency assessment to the Texas Education Agency. The committee has reviewed dozens of tests and has found them all wanting to a greater or lesser degree in terms of traditional psychometric criteria or linguistic content and organization. In their worst forms they pander to schools' tight bilingual budgets and some districts' desires not to identify LEP children, while others rest on highly questionable assumptions, purport to measure the impossible (e.g., purport to measure language dominance without measuring language proficiency), or do not guide the users whatsoever in the interpretation of the results. The rest too often present linguistically unrealistic demands (e.g., "Now we're going to talk in English," or "Please use complete sentences") or

arbitrary scoring or weighting procedures, and generally suffer from a lack of sensible items, sufficient language sampling, and reliability. Then, too, not even a handful have been validated against groups of proficient monolinguals, and none have been examined in the light of the demand characteristics of bilingual or English monolingual classrooms. Tests that use scales or ordered categories of proficiency are not sensitive to the marginally proficient student in both languages who is nevertheless communicatively competent in informal bilingual settings. And, as mentioned earlier, no extant test measures LEP status directly above the first few grades of elementary school.

Testing School Achievement in Spanish

The testing of school achievement areas in Spanish poses other problems, not the least of which is the lack of tests well suited for Spanish speakers. A few tests are on the market, but these are essentially translated--and in some cases renormed--versions of the English achievement series published by the same company. These translations have item-by-item similarity with the original tests in English, which effectively precludes the use of both English and Spanish versions of the same level test on the same bilingual children, since exposure to one would produce a practice effect for the other. A notable exception is the CIRCO test battery (Bernal, Note 3; Hardy, Note 4), which was adapted (not merely translated) from the CIRCUS (in English) and which includes new tests developed for Hispanic students. This test, however, can be used only with four to six year olds.

What Might Be Done

Several good reviews of Spanish proficiency tests exist (e.g., Silverman, Noa, & Russell, 1976; Dieterich, Freeman, & Crandall, Note 5), but they seem to converge weakly on the conclusion that few good ones are to be had, and are more useful for indicating what to avoid than for what to do.

There is clearly a psychometric lag in test development in Spanish. At the minimum we need to blend the talents and interests of bilingual educators, linguists, and psychometricians to produce tests which circumvent many of the pitfalls exhibited by current instruments, tests which have high content validity and practical administrability, tests with high reliability and high utility for pedagogical and research purposes. The tests' scaling or categorizing system should be validated against well studied groups of children who represent a meaningful range of language competencies at different grade or developmental levels. And, of course, such a test should, at the appropriate ages [illegible] all of the receptive and productive language modes.

Experience in developing the CIRCO tests laid to rest the popular fallacy that no test can suitably measure the competencies of geographically and ethnically diverse Spanish-speaking groups. Multiethnic writing teams and tryout samples can be employed, an operationally defined group of students who are linguistically eligible to take the test can be established through a screening test, and appropriate warm-up exercises would ensure that students know <u>how</u> to take the test. If reading and writing subtests in English and Spanish were also included, then the resultant battery could assess LEP status for older elementary school children and provide educationally important data, results with prescriptive as well as diagnostic possibilities.

Teacher Assessments

In addition to the assessment of students there is a growing trend to assess teachers in Spanish (and sometimes in English) language skills (Carlisle-Zepeda & Saldate, 1978). This author endorses this trend (although he is aware of the political agendas which sometimes motivate it), because one reason why so many bilingually certified teachers do not teach in Spanish is that their basic Spanish skills are inadequate or that their content-related vocabulary is lacking. Teachers who teach in bilingual classrooms must be both professionally and interpersonally articulate in both languages.

One of the techniques being used to assess teachers' Spanish competency is the Language Proficiency Interview (LPI), a taped and blindly scored version of the technique used by the Foreign Service Institute and the Peace Corps to test the conversational abilities of their trainees. The LPI is used by New Jersey, and Texas uses it in addition to a standardized, multiple-choice test of Spanish language competencies for previously certified teachers seeking to obtain a bilingual endorsement through additional course work. Obviously cloze tests and other procedures could be used. What is still needed is a better measure of teachers' Spanish writing skills. Techniques for estimating the adequacy of writing samples in English have been developed, and these could probably be adopted for the assessment of Spanish writing skills as well.

Summary

Bilingual--and especially Spanish--assessment is now recognized as crucially important for the selection of bilingual teachers, for the screening, placement, and reclassification of LEP students, and for designing appropriate bilingual educational programs. Extant instruments, unfortunately,

are not entirely capable of satisfying these needs. Cooperative efforts for test development are bright prospects, however, since the technology for adequate instruments already exists. We need only to hold out our hands to one another.

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